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ABSTRACT

The English curriculum needs to provide and structure learning experiences that enable students to speak, write, and read their culture into the curriculum and at the same time enable teachers to learn their way into the students' cultures. For students who do not or have not yet acquired nonverbal patterns of the mainstream, the communication and maintenance of their cultural identity within that stream is not a simple matter. When teachers cannot decode, read, and understand unfamiliar nonverbal communication breakdown behaviors of students culturally different from themselves, all kinds of labels are attached to the students. A person's verbal communication skills are often judged solely by looking at or listening to that person. Cultural assumptions are made based on the language spoken, particularly for African-American children who speak Black English. The English curriculum as a tool for socialization within the educational institution should provide instructional designs and methods for teaching language and literature as much as possible, through using the context that makes up various cultures. When the English curriculum provides experience for students to speak, write, and read their culture into the curriculum and teachers learn their way into students' cultures, then students of various minority ethnicities can be embraced and offered full access to all rewards available in society. (RS)

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ED 369 110

Differential Predictions

In Nonverbal And Verbal Communications

For African American Students

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

This is a response to Keith Gilyard's book Voices of the Self. This paper deals with the impact on and the implications for the English curriculum.

PART I: NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

When you look into the mirror you may think that you see your reflection, but your reflection sees you.

"When we look at the silent film, we have no access to the speech, but we can see two people behaving their personalities. We may not be able to make inferences about their intelligence, education, or verbal skill, but we can see other kinds or information." (Byers and Byers, 9). Byers and Byers go on to explain that nonverbal elements of communication such as facial expressions, gestures, distance, body orientation, and the length of maintenance or avoidance of eye contact, are interwoven so precisely that they cannot be broken into separate parts. In fact, through the interweaving of such a behavior, a grammar of nonverbal communication is formed (10).

Most people learn the grammar of nonverbal communication first through the culture of the home and secondly through the culture of the community. Fortunately, for some, as they assimilate into a third culture, the educational culture, the grammar of already acquired nonverbal communications matches that of the educational system and no change is required. Unfortunately, however, for those whose nonverbal communication systems do not match that of the educational culture, a change is required, and it is within this change that conflict emerges.

For the students who do not or have not yet acquired nonverbal patterns of the mainstream, the communication and maintenance of their cultural identity within that stream is not a simple matter. These students have to educate the real self of home, the emergent self of community, and the required self of the educational institution. With so many "selves" to tend to, it is no wonder that students of a minority culture finally or easily get overwhelmed, frustrated, and confused before creating some semblance of a required self. This self usually surfaces as a protective agent within the mainstream academic community.

The personality of this semblance of a required self that is forced to emerge triggers a conative or felling dimension for decoding an environment which requires decoding with a metacognitive process (Atman, 4). In other words, the student begins decoding nonverbal communication with what he instinctively knows and feels according to his own culture. The necessary metacognitive process needed to recognize and guide the cognitive elements "short circuits" and there is nothing to affix a translation to. It is like looking for a full reflection in a tarnished mirror, but what is seen is a form with no defined characteristics. This is just as Keith Gilyard's experience upon being introduced to Class 1-1. The principal asks,

"Shall we call you Raymond or Keith?" and the

narrative response: Nobody had ever called me Raymond before. Uptown it was always Keith or Keithy or Little Gil. Raymond was like a fifth wheel. A spare. And that's what I decided to make these

> people call me. They cannot meet Keith now. I will put someone else together for them and he will be their classmate until further notice. That will be the first step in this particular survival plan. The point is to have a plot. To keep a part of myself I could trust (Gilyard, 43).

When teachers cannot decode, read, and understand unfamiliar nonverbal communication breakdown behaviors of students culturally different from themselves, all kids of labels are attached to the students. These labels subtly begin to be used to characterize certain cultures which are different from the dominant group. For example, on one hand, labels such as apathetic, does not participate, not interested in learning, and lazy; and on the other hand, aggressive, sneaky, lacks self control, and simple minded are labels commonly expressed to identify behaviors which are not congruent with mainstream behaviors. These descriptives don't say much for either hand except that the behaviors decidedly connote negativity and are dealt with only to the extent that they can be extinguished. The labeling, though perhaps unintended, leads to decreased motivation and poor academic performance on the part of the student, and makes the distance from the student's culture further from the school's culture. Consequently, the child has less of a chance for success. In the context of the mainstream educational culture the student experiences what may be termed a "differential communication prediction": <u>If</u> he violates, compromises, or denies his real (home), self <u>then</u> he will lose his own culture. <u>But</u>, in so doing,

he will succeed in assimilating into educational culture and not be outside the mainstream (Kelly, 123).

The breakdown in the nonverbal communication between the student's and teacher's cultures has definite implications for the English curriculum. Since the teacher is supposedly the controlling factor, it will become more and more her responsibility to learn, harness, and direct nonverbal communications sent and received. Not only must she become capable of doing this with students of various cultures, but she, herself, must be able to move between, function within, and lead students within their cultural space in such a way as to reinforce the real self of the home culture. An English curriculum should be able to provide for such movement due to the sheer compositor what we call "teaching English".

A teacher will also have to recognize that some behaviors performed by the students are attempts to initiate communication. The behaviors aren't negative in and of themselves, but really questions about behavior-context. In other words, what kind of self is necessary here? In response a teacher must be willing to "participate and engage in the full range of the student's nonverbal communication process with the knowledge that the students can only learn what the teacher is willing to share" (Byers and Byers, 16). However, if the teacher gives the student a set of cultural performances that are coded and organized by someone else and expected to rote-learn, the student has been offered a quite different and less useful opportunity. The

desired cultural transition may cause alienation from the educational process. In addition it may weaken the home culture which may be a source of enabling the student to "negotiate with the mainstream Anglo culture" (Dean, 36).

This implication calls for more than an understanding mind. It points to the fact that teachers must be trained to become cultural clinicians as well as cultural technicians. In order that a teacher be able to help make nonverbal cultural transitions easier for students, she must develop a process that calls for the employment of certain skills for the purpose of that transition. Should problems arise, the clinician/technician should have within her repertoire of competencies pause problem solving skills that will lead to easier cultural transitions (Parkway, 109). And, as the teacher helps students she is at the same time increasing her "own skills in moving between cultures and learning from the students how to make transitions herself" (Dean, 37).

PART II: <u>VERBAL COMMUNICATION</u>

> **We say, "far away"; the Zulu has for that a word which means, in our sentence form "there where someone cries out": 'O mother, I am lost.' ---- Martin Buber**

That a student's verbal language is a manifestation of his cultural identity gives rise to yet another "differential communication prediction" for the student. If he violates, compromises, or denies his own language then he will lose his own dialect. But, in so doing, he will succeed in speaking correctly (Standard English) and not be outside the mainstream lingua franca or language of wider communication.

A person's language skill is often judges solely by looking at or listening to that person. An assumption is then made that "the presence or absence of particular linguistic alternates directly reflects significant information about group membership, values, relative prestige, and power relationships" (Fishman, J. and Lueders-Salman, E., 79). For example, particularly in the case of African-American children who speak Black English, cultural assumptions are made based on the language spoken. These assumptions may be as harsh as, the student is not only black but lower-class black, neither he, nor his parents, care about education, he'll never gain influence where it counts anyway, and as a result never have any real power. With such a set of conscious or unconscious assumptions, "Black English then becomes a stereotype that represents a certain kind of person, all of him, all of the time" (79). The student is like a language slave. He strives to speak Standard English, but when he doesn't, he is beat down with the very language that he strives to speak.

The English curriculum as a tool for socialization within the educational institution should provide instructional designs and methods for teaching language and literature as much as possible, through using the context that makes up various cultures. The goal is not to take someone's home language and dispose of it, but rather to show the importance of its use in particular behavior-context.

Of course, the implication for the English curriculum should deal with the question; What strategies and content would suffice to interrelate the language and culture of home with the content of Standard English and literature offered in the English curriculum?

For the teaching of Standard English to speakers of dialects, Virginia Allen offers several strategies to help students develop a new set of language habits. First, is to formulate and present a definition as a target of instruction. The definition that she presents is, "Standard English is the kind of English habitually used by most of the educated English-speaking persons in the United States" (Allen, 123). This definition does not delineate cultures, nor does it proffer one group of people over another in the ethnic sense of dominant minority. A student does not have to be made to feel that he must give up the language of his culture and talk like someone of another culture. He is simply going to learn and use the language of the educated. With this definition the differential communication prediction stated at the beginning of this part can then be removed.

Next, in Allen's process is selection of linguistic features that definitely distinguish Standard English from Non-Standard English, then providing intensive study and meaningful pattern practice for these features. This pattern practice includes teaching standard usage rather than scolding for non-standard usage. This strategy for teaching a second dialect then "amounts to teaching the smallest possible number of vitally significant terms -- and teaching them hard" (126).

By teaching the distinguishing features the student doesn't have to be in a quandary over or feel inferior because his dialect is wrong and Standard English is right. The two languages are just different and they are both right when used in appropriate situations or both wrong when the speaker is put at a disadvantage.

to speak to the point of culture in the content of literature offered in the English curriculum is to consider some options. Are we to present literature from a variety of cultures even if a particular culture is not represented in the classroom? Are we to let the cultural make-up of the class determine the text of the class as individual experience? Or, are we to do both, having one complement the other?

One model initiated by Terry Dean calls for "the teacher initiating culturally oriented topics to explore issues of cultural diversity, different value systems, and different ways of problem solving" (Dean, 29). The content is the student's culture and the topics and strategies of

implementation are designed specifically to elicit the real feelings and cultural experiences of the student. In addition, the literature furnished should provide the same function. When students are encouraged to focus on their own experiences as context for literature, even the differential prediction in non-verbal communication, as mentioned in Part I, can be removed from the student's agenda.

In the final analysis, the English curriculum needs to provide and structure learning experiences that enable students to speak, write, and read their culture into the curriculum and at the same time enable teachers to learn their way into the students' cultures. When both of these conditions emerge as vital forces from within the deep structure of the curriculum, not only African-American students, but students of various minority ethnicities can be embraced and offered full access to all rewards available in society.

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